

# Neoliberal Thought Collectives: Integrating Social Science and Intellectual History

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## INTRODUCTION: NEOLIBERALISM AND THE ELUSIVE CONCEPT OF CULTURE

The study of neoliberalism remains fraught with difficulties, partly due to the polyvalence of the category in conjunction with disciplinary particularities. Social scientists are mainly interested in the study of social, political and economic relations and institutions. When social scientists discuss neoliberalism, they usually refer to the transformation of welfare state capitalism and the rise of the competition state, to marketization and intensified globalization. Key actors are corporations, interest groups and political leaders like Ronald Reagan or Margaret Thatcher, followed by Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder, and their equivalents in other world regions. Curiously, many of these leaders belong to not only conservative but also (nominally) progressive, Labour and Social Democratic parties. While there will be passing reference to Friedrich August von Hayek and Milton Friedman (or Wilhelm Röpke since Foucault's biopolitics lectures were published in English), the historical evolution of ideas and the machineries behind the production of neoliberal knowledge and ideology remain in a black box (Overbeek and Appeldoorn, 2012). The partial conversion of both Conservatives and Social

Democrats to neoliberal ideologies is hard to explain as an outcome unless one accepts some version of structural determinism (Harvey, 2005; Duménil and Lévy, 2011).

Researchers interested in ideology and political theory, the history of ideas and the history of economic thought instead can be found tracking and tracing the origins and evolutions of neoliberal scholarship and discourse. Key targets of scholarly interest here are leading European and American academics and public intellectuals like Hayek and Ludwig von Mises of Austrian economics, Röpke and Alexander Rüstow of German-Swiss ordoliberalism, or James Buchanan, Gary Becker and Milton Friedman of the Virginia and Chicago School, respectively. Neither intellectual life in other world regions nor the corporate nor the political worlds enter the picture much (Foucault, 2008; Burgin, 2012).<sup>1</sup>

A primary interest in academics and details of discourse typically coincides with a limited interest in the broader socio-economic circumstances that co-determine the social significance and political relevance of ideas, though this need not be the case. Tom Medvetz (2012), for example, has used the case of welfare studies to explain how the new paradigm of welfare dependency was born and turned into an extremely relevant

storyline that replaced inequality- and deprivation-centered research and reform programmes (affirmative action, etc.). While Medvetz easily points to the business links and corporate-backed activism in his narrative focused on think-tanks, the background of neoliberal intellectual history for this detailed attack on the welfare state is missing. Unlike Medvetz, Mark Blyth (2013) has pointed to the foundations laid by Austrian Economics and Ordoliberalism as basic schools of economic thought and enabling theories like monetarism and public choice in his effort to explain the lasting impact of the 'dangerous idea' of austerity so popular in political and business circles around the world. Blyth does not quite explain, however, how the different components hang together as parts of more comprehensive neoliberal networks (compare Plehwe and Walpen, 2006). His account would benefit in turn from a stronger reflection on civil society organizations, such as think-tanks, which were involved in the cross-border authorization and institutionalization of austerity-related economic and social policy expertise both in the global South and North.

Why do social scientists and intellectual historians by and large keep speaking past each other in spite of efforts to integrate ideas into social scientific research programmes? Some theorists have sought to overcome this impasse by offering a more systematic account of ideas: witness Vivien Schmidt's (2008) discursive institutionalism or Nullmeier's (2013) political science of knowledge. We have also seen a push to develop a cultural political economy, including important work on knowledge brands by Sum and Jessop (2013). But culture in general and the neoliberal overhaul of knowledge production, distribution and its related authority, in particular, remains a map that is difficult to chart. A part of the answer relates to issues of interdisciplinary research in general, another part to intricate problems of studying knowledge regimes.

Intellectual historians and the humanities in general do not play a big role in or get much attention from social science, unfortunately. Many social scientists in turn find it difficult to spend much time on intellectual history or the social co-production of knowledge and resulting power regimes in their efforts to explain the evolution and transformation of social orders. Curiously, knowledge institutions do not figure prominently in the structural and institutional configuration of modern society in spite of prominent shibboleths like the 'information society' or 'knowledge society' (a notable exception is: Mirowski, 2011). Susan Strange, in any case, was quite right when she observed:

The power derived from the knowledge structure is the one that has been most overlooked and underrated. ... [A] knowledge structure determines what knowledge is discovered, how it is stored, and who communicates it by what means to whom and on what terms ... power and authority are conferred on those ... who are acknowledged by society to be possessed of the 'right', desirable knowledge and engaged in the acquisition of more of it, and on those entrusted with its storage, and those controlling in any way the channels by which knowledge or information, is communicated. (Strange, 1988: 115, 117)

### **TANGIBLE CULTURE: TOWARDS A HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE AND POWER**

Some ways to advance research on knowledge (power) regimes in general and neoliberalism studies in particular have been found by way of relying on Karl Mannheim's work in sociology of knowledge. His categories of 'thought collective' and 'thought style' are of tremendous use for both theorizing and operationalizing knowledge production, competition and relevance-making. Going beyond concepts like scientific communities (Gläser, 2006), epistemic communities (Haas, 1992) or discourse coalitions (Hajer, 1993) that have been employed, respectively, to study the social order of academia, scientifically-backed elite influence in policy making and the intellectual dimensions of social agency in policy studies more broadly, thinking in terms of thought collectives and styles emphasizes the historical relevance of worldviews in knowledge production. Mannheim emphasizes the more or less directed, yet always intersubjective and distributed, dimension of knowledge production, direct and indirect relationship of interests and ideas, and the lasting or temporary institutionalization of authoritative knowledge in society, which is indispensable for explaining the relative influence of different bodies of knowledge over time within and across borders (Mannheim, 1925 [1986]; compare also Mann, 1986).

Competing, and arguably dominant, epistemologies of scientific knowledge production, like Thomas Kuhn's emphasis on historical evolution and paradigmatic change (in the natural sciences), make it difficult to explain the maintenance of paradigms contrary to scientific revolution, for example, let alone the historical comeback of convictions long considered superstition (like austerity, creationism or racial science) (on Kuhn, see

Fuller, 2000).<sup>2</sup> Ludwik Fleck's (1979 [1935]) well-known conceptualization of thought styles and thought collectives is more versatile than Kuhn's concepts of disciplinary matrix and paradigm. His philosophy of science accommodates individual membership in different thought collectives, integrates communities of professionals in the production of knowledge and emphasizes continuity over generations and across episodes of paradigm change in spite of significant advances in knowledge domains (compare Mößner, 2011: 368f. on the relevant differences between Kuhn and Fleck). But we need to go back to Mannheim's ideas to move forward, itself testimony to the entanglements of social scientific research.

Unlike Ludwik Fleck's seminal contribution to science history, Mannheim's knowledge of sociological work has been given little attention (except for Kettler and Meja, 1995). This is unfortunate because Mannheim's conceptualization of thought styles and collectives is dynamic and broad, which enables neoliberalism studies to advance in ways Fleck's sociology of science work could not. It is also of considerable importance that Mannheim can be singled out as the most important foe of early neoliberals in their efforts to deny and obscure the ideological, social and historical foundations of their own claims to epistemic authority and cognitive power. The statement of aims of the Mont Pèlerin Society, arguably the most important intellectual home of early neoliberals, was outspoken and explicit in its attack on historicism and relativism as guiding principles of the philosophy of science in addition to historical materialism (compare Hartwell, 1995: 50). As it turns out, this was a dedicated effort to refute Mannheim's re-negotiation of socio-economic influence on knowledge production and a resulting perspective of historical relativism (not epistemological relativism!) (Mößner, 2011: 364; compare Pooley, 2007, for details on the attacks on Mannheim). While Mannheim objected to vulgar theories of direct economic determinism, he continued the historical materialist project of philosophy of science (compare Kecskemeti, 1952: 18) – much to the dislike of the phalanx of neoliberal science philosophers, such as Michael Polanyi, Karl Popper, Louis Rougier, Raymond Aron, Walter Eucken and Friedrich August von Hayek, all steeped in conventionalism (Beddeleem, 2017).

Contrary to Mannheim, the neoliberal philosophy of science thus remained committed to Kantian (romantic) and phenomenological notions of absolute values. This is a core aspect of the neoliberal philosophy of science and one that is shared with conservatism, though neoliberals developed strong efforts to provide new directions for neoliberal science and philosophy. The idea that

Mannheim was guilty of the sin of relativism was actually dubious. He repeatedly qualified superficial notions of epistemological relativism (which would suggest that there simply cannot be truth). But he objected even more strongly to notions of intellectual autonomy and related absolute truth claims in social science. For him, social scientists can only be competitors 'in truth', always influenced by historical constraints and perspectives related to socio-economic circumstances. His was thus not an absolute relativism, but rather a productive and generative version rooted in Marxism and Historicism (Mannheim, 1925 [1986]: 137, fn 1).<sup>3</sup>

Since Mannheim based his philosophy of knowledge on the meta-worldview of historicism and socio-economic co-determination, and because he also believed in science-based interventionism and planning, however, he was elevated to the role of key villain in Popper, Hayek and Polanyi's wartime writing (Pooley, 2007). Neoliberals were thoroughly opposed to Mannheim's system of linking intellectual and social history, which can of course serve also to reveal the extent to which neoliberal scientific and political endeavors relied on common social pre-conditions. Michael Polanyi (1966) himself cautiously pointed to social pre-conditions in his theory of tacit knowledge. Mannheim in any case offers a theoretical and methodological toolkit indispensable for neoliberalism studies, as we will show in this chapter – a tool-kit which incidentally shares with neoliberalism a deep preoccupation with the conditions shaping the production and dissemination of knowledge and its varying authority, depending on who and where this knowledge is circulated or made public.

We will first go a little deeper into the previous use of the categories of thought collective and style in neoliberalism research and reconsider Fleck and Mannheim's original contributions in particular (section two). We will need to take the reception a few inches further in order to avoid the dangers of popular simplification of thought collectives and styles, which will also include a small revision of my own previous work. Applying Mannheim, we will elaborate on important dimensions of the study of neoliberal thought collectives in section three. The final section is dedicated to a brief discussion of the neoliberal intellectual space or thought style as it gravitates between socialism and social liberalism on the one hand, and conservatism on the other hand. Throughout this chapter I will draw on the literature on the history of the Mont Pèlerin Society and related networks, but address some shortcomings and emerging opportunities. The chapter will end with a brief conclusion and a view on research perspectives needed to further advance both the political sociology of knowledge and neoliberalism studies.

## WHY MANNHEIM'S TAKE ON NEOLIBERAL THOUGHT STYLES AND COLLECTIVES?

Several students of neoliberalism have already referred to notions of thought collective and style (Nordmann, 2005; Plehwe and Walpen, 2007; Mirowski and Plehwe, 2009; Mirowski, 2013). Each of the contributions is concerned with groups of neoliberal intellectuals, a methodology described as situated prosopography or group biography. The combined study of groups of intellectuals and professionals in conjunction with organizations, think-tanks in particular, was developed in an effort to better understand the historical evolution and varieties of neoliberalism in terms of social thought, social struggles and social ordering within and across fields and borders. The examination of intellectual thought and social relations of groups of neoliberals has more than an elective affinity with Mannheim's project of knowledge sociology. It is neither simply intellectual history nor social history, network and movement analysis, but a combination of both: the content and context of intellectual developments can only be explained by way of focusing on the social co-production of knowledge – not only by academics. While scholars working in science and technology studies have contributed greatly to the development of this perspective, related work on civic epistemologies and knowledge regimes still displays a strong national bias (Jasanoff, 2005; Campbell and Pedersen, 2014). The neoliberal groups examined within and around the Mont Pèlerin Society are ideal objects for studying the transnational social co-production of ideas due to the combined membership of academics from many different countries, disciplines, and professions (including media, politics, business, NGOs; compare Plehwe and Walpen, 2006; Schulz-Forberg and Olsen, 2014).

Nordmann (2005) was first to talk about thought collectives and styles in his study of the life-long relationship between Hayek and Popper. He recognized the need to go beyond their ideological commitment to neoliberalism since both tried to use specific academic approaches to counter competing research efforts and ideologies. The link between ideology and academic effort, he thought, was best captured by the concept of thought style and thought collective, which he borrowed from Ludwik Fleck (1979 [1935]). Fleck defined a thought collective '*as a community of persons mutually exchanging the ideas or maintaining intellectual interaction*' (Fleck, 1979: 39, emphasis in original). By implication, he observes that such a collective '*also provides the special*

*"carrier" for the historical development of any field of thought, as well as for the given stock of knowledge and level of culture. This we have designated thought style*' (1979: 39, emphasis in original).

Nordmann shows the cross-sectional correspondence of Hayek's effort to position micro-economics against (Keynesian) macro-economics and Popper's micro-reformism against large-scale social reform. They are both part of the neoliberal thought style even if they also belonged to different thought collectives with regard to their particular academic and intellectual specializations. In Fleck's theory, each thought collective is comprehensive and fully coherent, but individuals can also belong to different thought collectives (e.g., Hayek's economic reasoning and Popper's social and philosophical thinking can be considered part of different thought collectives). Incidentally, Fleck's system provides for a fundamental critique of Popper's falsification approach. Fleck explains how many dimensions of knowledge remain outside the perspective of a specific thought collective because they do not fit the system. While Popper went beyond positivism, his critical rationalism remained committed to an absolutism that is rejected by Fleck. Fleck's definition of a thought style as '[the readiness for] *directed perception, with corresponding mental and objective assimilation of what has been so perceived*' (Fleck, 1979: 99, emphasis in original) nicely points to the active, though not necessarily conscious, dimension of the cognitive work of thought collectives. They are teams that learn to play a game in a specific way, which is by no means the only way. In terms of neoliberalism studies, it remains to be established who is on the team and according to which explicit and implicit rules the players are playing.

Nordmann (2005: 43) does relate Fleck's work back to Karl Mannheim, who was suspiciously absent in Fleck's references, despite his much earlier efforts and the clear scholarly overlap. Because Mannheim is considered somewhat esoteric (combining sociology of knowledge with ontological and existential terms) and ambivalent, paradoxically creating space for independent intellectual effort in the world of dependent knowledge production, Mannheim is dismissed somewhat prematurely in Nordmann's account (similarly: Konrad and Szelenyi, 1979; but compare Hull, 2006, who explains Mannheim's apparent inconsistency as a reaction against Lukács's absolute truth claim).

The first comprehensive analysis of the origins and evolution of the neoliberal thought style by Walpen (2004) preceded Nordmann's study, but did not yet use the categories of thought

collectives and style. Walpen takes us through the histories and social relationships of the many networks related to Mont Pèlerin across time and space. He speaks about the global neoliberal networks as miscellanea that require many different approaches and may never be charted fully, certainly not by one person, which explains some of the difficulties of neoliberalism studies, though this is shared with studies of Marxism or Liberalism, of course. Walpen relies on Marx and Gramsci in principle, but he also discusses Weber's work on religious sects and their secular contributions (in the United States) for an elastic civil society. Thus, Walpen seems to have been looking for sociological conceptualizations to make sense of what appears to be a rather strange social group: not just academic, not a political party, not just an interest group; arguably a new type of Principe, in Gramsci's sense of a leading group that aims at articulating a future to come. Consider Gramsci's introduction of the (communist) party as a new type of Machiavellian leader-advisor:

the modern prince, the myth of the prince cannot be a real person, no concrete individual. He can only be an organism; a complex element of society, in which collective will already takes shape, and asserts itself to a certain extent. This organism has already come into being due to historical developments. It is the political party, a first cell in which seeds of collective will are assembled, which tend to become universal and total. (Gramsci, 1991f., *Gefängnishefte* 13, § 1, 1537, my translation)

If we replace the term 'political party' by 'transnational intellectual party', Gramsci's characterization of the communist party fits quite well for the neoliberal international of the Mont Pèlerin Society or the elite socialism of the Fabians, after which it was modelled. It cannot be a real person (beyond Keynesianism or the equivalents of Hayekianism, Friedmanism, etc.), it can only be an organism, a complex element of society, including economic, political, philosophical, cultural, consulting, media and other dimensions, in which recognized collective will (attached to individualism, anti-communism, competition, entrepreneurship, etc.) already takes shape and holds the line in competition with other normative orientations. It has come into being in many places due to the support of individuals and organizations, including universities, think-tanks, business associations, corporate philanthropies, political parties, government institutions, and so on. It is an 'intellectual party', a first cell in which seeds of the somewhat paradoxical collective will of 'organized individualism' are assembled, and which tends to become universal and total.

It was only a short step from Gramsci's work on ideologically programmatic groups and Weber's work on secular dimensions of religious sectarian groups to Fleck and Mannheim's sociology of knowledge. After all, neither Gramsci nor Weber offered a systematic account of the knowledge efforts under observation in the case of organized neoliberals. In discussions with the author of this article, Walpen contributed a closer reading of Fleck and Mannheim to a jointly written German language article titled 'Neoliberal thought collectives and their thought style' (Plehwe and Walpen, 2007).

In contrast to Nordmann's emphasis on Fleck and science, I here consider Fleck of particular importance to the study of neoliberalism because his examination of scientific innovation was not restricted to the academic sphere. Fleck speaks about small esoteric circles and larger exoteric circles (1979: 105) relevant to innovation, and also discusses the importance of public opinion. Fleck's emphasis on the institutional dimension of communities thus resembles Hajer's (1993) discussion of discourse coalitions: impersonal communication between smaller circles and larger communities enables a social agency organized around specific storylines (or academic beliefs in Fleck's work). Fleck captures the non-cognitive dimensions of dedicated groups who are invested in an impersonal idea, carrying forward a common mood (Fleck, 1979: 106).

But Fleck's concept has problems that need to be addressed. In his scheme of things, one thought collective produces a specific thought style that is fully coherent (Fleck, 1979: 100). Fleck's thought style fully determines and constrains the notion of truth: if two individuals belong to the same thought collective, they have to agree on the truth of a thought. While individuals can be members of different thought collectives and thus adhere to different thought styles, it is not clear how change comes about once a specific thought style has been established. Almost inevitably every thought style has to become orthodoxy, which contradicts Fleck's own emphasis on the ongoing exchange of ideas as characteristic of thought collectives.<sup>4</sup>

Fleck suggests, however, that the relation of the esoteric circles to the exoteric circles defines different types of thought collectives engendering different dynamics corresponding to the relation between elites and masses.

If masses occupy a stronger position, a democratic tendency will be impressed upon this relation. The elite panders, as it were, to public opinion and strives to preserve the confidence of the masses. This is the situation in which the thought collective of science usually finds itself today. If the elite

enjoys the stronger position, it will endeavor to maintain distance and to isolate itself from the crowd. Then secretiveness and dogmatism dominate the life of the thought collective. This is the situation of religious thought collectives. The first, or democratic, form must lead to the development of ideas and to progress, the second possibly to conservatism and rigidity. (Fleck, 1979: 105–6)

This quote seems to suggest a difference between thought collectives that amounts to giving up the concept altogether since the relation between normative and cognitive dimensions of knowledge seems to not matter any longer, at least for the allegedly democratic thought collective. Suddenly public opinion (driven by what?) attains a primary role in determining truth. But Fleck's effort to point to differences in composition of thought collectives is nevertheless useful because the composition can certainly matter with regard to both scientific and normative collectives. In any case, we need to give up an overly static conception of thought collectives and styles to accommodate diversity within certain normative limits and innovation dynamics.

In other words, it is necessary to combine a larger degree of dissent and argumentation in thought collectives in conjunction with shared values, principled beliefs and the normative orientations needed to maintain and to explain the relative coherence and evolution of thought styles. It may indeed be interesting to think about degrees of pluralism and necessary constraints delineating thought styles and ideologies at large. Causes for orthodoxy and innovation in any case need better explanation than a crude juxtaposition of elite or mass dominance within thought collectives, and the role of public opinion as constraints of elites.

Karl Mannheim's work helps to relax the strong science sociological conditions of thought styles and collectives. He originally transferred the notion of style from poetics and rhetoric to science and from individual to group: formations and related contexts of experience are considered socio-genetic rather than individually innate if they are at all attributed to a style (Mannheim, 1922: 97). In his seminal essay on the sociology of knowledge, Mannheim then takes the notion of thought style beyond the field of science. Scientific facts are now presented as necessarily subject to interpretation by worldviews.

But it is clear to the historically minded that there can be no unchanging correspondence between a certain type of thought and a political current, e.g. between 'historic' thinking and 'conservatism'. Most types of thought admit of a multiple interpretation, either in a progressive or in a conservative sense.

This, however, cannot prevent us from investigating in concrete detail how in the real historical situation certain reality-demands allied themselves with a certain style of thought, and what changes of function occurred in this connection. As these investigations are further refined, the categories of 'conservatism' and 'progressivism' must be further differentiated and treated as dynamic entities. (Mannheim, 1925 [1986]: 146, fn 1)

Knowledge becomes intrinsically linked to interpretation guided by worldviews. A thought style constrains and enables the sorting and interpretation of facts, and is still subject to change over time. Part of the dynamic Mannheim is interested in comes from scientific discoveries. He observes:

it must be admitted that after one class has discovered some sociological or historical fact (which lay in its line of vision by virtue of its specific position), all other groups, no matter what *their* interests are, can equally take such fact into account – nay, *must* somehow incorporate such fact into their system of world interpretation. (Mannheim, 1925: 147, emphasis in original)

Other dynamics arise from socio-economic conditions that are also in flux. Thinkers articulate the reality-demands of specific social strata. Inevitable dynamics are thus related both to changing reality-demands tied to socio-economic change and to the need to adapt to discoveries that are possibly made by members dedicated to other thought styles. Thought styles thus need to adjust, but also have the capacity to help their adherents adapt to new demands – unless they collapse, we might add (compare Mannheim's 1925 [1986] study on conservatism).

Every thought style is characterized by a specific perspective. It relies on core terminology and concepts and opposes competing terms and concepts. It is forced to interact with competing thought styles because other thought collectives do make discoveries that need attention, and the reality demands of different strata direct new discoveries and discourse in ways that cannot be ignored. This can easily be illustrated by an example from the history book of neoliberalism. Confronted with notions of political integration in Europe, neoliberals developed their own work on the history of economic integration, pointing to the removal of obstacles (negative integration) rather than harmonization, coherent regulation or structural funds, etc. (positive integration) (Machlup, 1977). Both social democratic and conservative ideas of regulated capitalism eventually came under siege by neoliberal ideas of deregulated or 'free market' capitalism across borders. Early

intellectual efforts to develop a competitive notion of integration in line with neoliberal strategies went unnoticed, by and large, until they attained relevance in the context of the single market project and important court decisions of the 1980s. In economics, Herbert Giersch's (1985) analysis of Eurosclerosis added momentum to the negative integration option, and in political science, Fritz Scharpf's (1996) work on the negative integration bias of Europe seemed to validate the inevitability of European neoliberalism. In this context, Fritz Machlup's historical investigation seemed to matter a lot.

Mannheim's concept of thought style accommodates a variety of thought collectives and orientations as long as they fit under the umbrella of a common worldview or a common interpretative orientation. Fleck's views would require us to think of Hayek and Friedman as belonging to different thought styles, for example, because they differed on basic epistemological questions and on concrete issues of monetary theory. Mannheim's worldview-related concept of thought style instead allows for different, and to a certain extent competing, thought collectives, as long as they are broadly directed towards the same general perspective in terms of worldview. In light of this insight, the subtitle of *Road from Mont Pèlerin* (Mirowski and Plehwe, 2009) gets it wrong: the making of the neoliberal thought collective should either say 'the making of the neoliberal thought style' or the 'making of neoliberal thought collectives' to do justice to the unity and diversity of thought collectives like ordoliberalism, the second Chicago school, Austrian economics, the Virginia school and their many siblings and offspring (law and economics, constitutional economics, etc.). Mannheim invites us to move away from a monolithic view of both ideologies and thought collectives, but emphasizes their necessary plurality and points of linkage and openness with other styles, allowing for cross-styles and hybridations. Thought collectives, on the other hand, provide the necessary detail for capturing the complex multitude of competing – progressive, conservative, or neoliberal – thought styles. In Mannheim's view, the dynamic of scientific development is inevitably tied to the cultural phenomenon of competition sustained by thought collectives related to major worldviews (Mannheim, 1928).

Scientific development is tied to socio-economic constellations of particular times (and the resulting and frequently conflicting reality-demands of social forces), but it also transects time. Important discoveries can lead back to times that are long gone, offering history pride of place in the social sciences. To cite another episode from the neoliberal history book, consider one

of Ronald Coase's contributions to the ongoing debate over public and private services.

Coase is one of the eight members of the Mont Pèlerin Society to have received the Swedish Reichsbank Nobel Laureate in economics and is best known for his groundbreaking work on transaction costs and proposals for private contract alternatives to public rules. In his later years, Coase spent considerable time in the archives studying the history of the British postal system. Standard history celebrates the penny letter (standardized fares across the British Commonwealth), pioneered by Sir Rowland Hill in the early nineteenth century, and the postal system as a whole as an important contribution of modern statecraft to economic and social development. Coase disputed and, to a certain degree, corrected this narrative by demonstrating that British tea merchants had originally pioneered standardized pricing for their services. He also ascertained that Hill's original proposal aimed at preserving cost calculation in mail transport pricing because Hill had suggested standardizing postage for mail between large population centers only, certainly not for the whole of the Commonwealth. State officials originally even objected to lowering prices for fear of revenue loss. While the undeniable success of the historical evolution of the public postal infrastructure can certainly not be refuted by Coase's account, his findings emphasize the ingenuity of entrepreneurship rather than statecraft, and establishes one of the founders of the modern postal system as responsible for market-oriented reforms of the same system (compare details in Plehwe, 2002).

In Mannheim's term, the late Ronald Coase evidently responded to new reality-demands and at the same time discovered new historical facts that needed to be integrated into the thought styles that competed with neoliberalism. His results can also be (and have been) used to promote the privatization and marketization of postal services.

### **MANNHEIM'S TOOL-KIT FOR STUDYING NEOLIBERALISM: CAREFULLY RELATING HISTORY OF IDEAS TO SOCIAL HISTORY**

Some students and critics of neoliberalism would argue that Coase would be best considered a spokesperson for interest groups and corporations, like UPS and FedEx, that hoped to benefit from the privatization of postal services. But did the express industry direct and pay for this research and mind? Perhaps interest group money did flow, but probably not. In any case, this

question (which we cannot and do not need to answer here) leads to the issue of economic determinism, which Mannheim rejected as vulgar Marxism. Mannheim did not deny that examples of direct economic determinism exist, but they are only one among many other forms of socio-economic relevance for social thought. The importance of this double insight can hardly be overestimated. Scholars who insinuate that neoliberalism is nothing but corporate ideology, as indicated by Lewis Powell's 1971 confidential memorandum to the US Chamber of Commerce (Harvey, 2005), obviously have trouble explaining why corporations supported (and continue to support) different thought styles shaped by conservatism, social democracy, fascism, and possibly others. The emphasis on the relative autonomy of neoliberal intellectuals in the work of Walpen (2004) or Plehwe, Walpen and Neunhöffer (2006) does not imply that there have not been direct links to economic interests – these have always been recognized in the study of the Mont Pèlerin Society, and indeed were at times quite ambivalent (compare Phillips-Fein, 2009). Mannheim's framework is well suited for bridging the gap between economic determinism (by interest groups) and different degrees of autonomy, a move that remains necessary for better understanding the confluence of economic and other interests in the making of neoliberal thought collectives. As Mannheim states:

This preliminary systematic work in the history of ideas [genesis of intellectual standpoints, D.P.] can lead to a sociology of knowledge only when we examine the problem of how the various intellectual standpoints and 'styles of thought' are rooted in an underlying historico-social reality. (Mannheim, 1925 [1986]: 182)

Mannheim clearly warns here against perspectives that disconnect intellectual from socio-economic life. But because socio-economic realities are not unitary and homogeneous from country to country, from era to era, etc., corresponding knowledge regimes also tend to be diverse. Mannheim suggests that only the combined study of social thought and social stratification (best understood as classes, in his view) yields a sociology of knowledge that goes beyond the history of ideas and social history. He goes on to argue for the elimination of naturalism and all crude conceptions of class and knowledge or interests and ideas, all of which lead to oversimplification. He refers to a naturalist epoch of Marxism, when material interests were thought to dictate ideology, and instead seeks to develop the notion of mediated relationships to interest:

If we want to broaden ideological research into a sociology of knowledge ... the first thing to do is to overcome the one-sidedness of recognizing motivation by interest as the only form of social conditioning. ... In the case of ideas held because of a direct interest, we may speak of 'interestedness'; to designate the more indirect relation between the subject and those other ideas, we may use the parallel expression 'committedness'. In fact, it is one of the most striking features of history that a given economic system is always embedded, at least as to its origin, in a given intellectual cosmos, so that those who seek a certain economic order also seek the intellectual outlook correlated with it. When a group is directly interested in an economic system, then it is also indirectly 'committed' to the other intellectual, artistic, philosophical, etc. forms corresponding to that economic system. Thus, indirect 'committedness' to certain mental forms is the most comprehensive category in the field of the social conditioning of ideas. (Mannheim, 1925: 183–184)

Mannheim thus urges us to look at competing thought styles and ideologies and at the social strata that sustain them in a sufficiently differentiated way. He does not ask for studies insinuating greater autonomy *per se*, though, because such autonomy basically does not exist. But the expansion of knowledge production he already witnessed in his time required more fine-grained examination of intellectual life. Subsequently, the picture becomes even more complicated. Due to the increasing commercialization of science, it is certainly not the case that the influence of interests in knowledge production is less today, but we are also seeing an expansion of cultural production occurring at varying degrees of distance from specific economic interests.

In the case of neoliberalism studies, this leads us to a situation in which we find both more committed supporters of neoliberal varieties of capitalism in various academic and cultural spheres and a changing composition of corporate interests and knowledge producers in support of this view. Corporate backers of neoliberalism in the 1950s differed markedly from the corporate constituencies of the 1980s, for example. And the relatively small group of intellectuals committed to the neoliberal project in its early years grew and diversified significantly over time. However, the later evolution of neoliberalism can only be understood if we observe the new perspective at the status nascendi. If we do not know what the core of a thought style and ideology is, we will probably also fail to appreciate its evolutions. This brings us back to the intellectual history part of the story.

## MAPPING THE NEOLIBERAL THOUGHT STYLE

The difficulty in recognizing neoliberalism is expressed perfectly by Michael Freeden's (1996) great volume on ideologies and political theory. Freeden covers the major ideologies of liberalism, conservatism and socialism, and adds chapters on the new contenders of feminism and green ideology almost 20 years after what many proclaim was a rise of neoliberalism in the shape of Thatcherism and Reaganomics, which he discusses as part of conservatism. Freeden's emphasis on the link between ideology and political theory is reminiscent of Mannheim, and his morphological approach is perfectly suited to mapping the core and periphery concepts of different thought styles and belief systems. Alas, neoliberalism simply does not seem to meet his standard of 'distinct thought-products that invite careful investigation in their own right' and that are 'actual arrangements of political thinking' (Freeden, 1996: 23). How does Freeden deal with neoliberal intellectuals?

Interestingly, Hayek falls in the category of liberal pretenders (Freeden, 1996: 299–310) and both Friedman and Hayek figure prominently in his chapter on conservative revival and recent American conservatism, in particular. Mannheim would probably suggest that Freeden's work is characterized by a lack of self-relativization, at least with regard to his understanding of liberalism, where his norm appears to be social liberalism. A focus on the original formation of neoliberalism during the 1930s, as a response to social liberalism and conservative collectivism, allows us to disagree, respectfully, with Freeden's failed effort to imperfectly subsume neoliberals under the umbrella of conservatism. It is not possible to observe the later inroads of neoliberalism in competing ideologies of both social liberalism and social democracy (e.g., via Popper) and conservatism if we prematurely identify conservatism and neoliberalism, for example. Freeden also falls short of Mannheim's advice to link the study of the history of ideas and social history by way of examining social stratification and changing socio-economic circumstances. His examination of the historical evolution of ideologies and thought styles therefore necessarily remains abstract and general, even if he does speak of specific countries at points. But the biggest problem in Freeden's scheme clearly is obliviousness: neoliberalism does not exist.

The history and rise of a new worldview indeed can be missed if the analysis of major ideologies and political theories is arranged in the abstractness of broad schemes and no sufficient effort is

made to relate the evolution of ideas back to major social struggles and changing socio-economic realities. Why would Hayek be a liberal pretender and a part of new conservative movements at the same time? Why did liberals object to the neoliberal stream of ideas generated by Hayek and his friends? Why did American (and other) conservatives start to dismiss certain varieties of established conservative economic thought in favor of the free-market rhetoric of neoliberals?

Michael Mann reminds us: 'An ideology will emerge as a powerful, autonomous movement when it can put together in a single explanation and organization a number of aspects of existence that have hitherto been marginal, interstitial to the dominant institutions of power' (Mann, 1986: 21). A careful study of the history of organized neoliberals will reveal just this. In opposition to both traditional liberalism (*laissez-faire*) and the new social liberal mainstream of the liberal worldview, neoliberals considered it necessary to develop a programme that was labelled neoliberal in the late 1930s (Walpen, 2004; Denord, 2009). Why was the programme not labelled neo-conservative? The autonomous movement of neoliberals (or right-wing liberals, to clarify the major difference with social liberal new liberalism) insisted on individualism, ownership rights and freedom of economic contract in adherence to a holistic idea of (capitalist) economy (Slobodian, 2017), which differed from the organicist, collectivist and culturalist perspectives they found in conservatism. Hayek later gave additional reasons why he did not consider himself conservative. Conservatism had nothing to offer in terms of what his own thought style required: a singular and clear sense of the direction of change needed as 'an alternative to the direction in which we are moving' (Hayek, 1960). Conservatism, like social liberalism, was prone at the time to embrace the idea of the welfare state, modernization and a certain amount of planning. Neoliberalism rejected both state-led planning and traditional ideas of natural order (of the market and of traditional society), which enabled neoliberals to compete for authority in the postwar battle over the future of the 'good society' (Lippmann, 1937), despite a frequently marginal position during the postwar decades. While neoliberals accepted the need for stabilization and a certain amount of social integration, in accordance with social liberalism and conservatism, neoliberals opposed the extent to which this came to be considered a function of the state and planning. Support for social integration was also conditional. Early neoliberals embraced social minimum standards only if they were 'not inimical to initiative and the functioning of the market', in the words of the statement of aims (Plehwe, 2009: 25).

If organized neoliberals and related networks are taken seriously, we can start to follow their intellectual efforts at a distance from both social liberalism and conservatism. Taking the neoliberal networks of the Mont Pèlerin Society (about 1,200 members so far) as a starting point allows us to begin discerning the evolution of neoliberal thought in many different countries. We can revisit the discussions and confrontations with competing ideologies and thought styles. We can observe the expansion of neoliberal intellectual space between competitors on the left and on the right. We can investigate the direct and indirect links to interest groups. In this regard, it helps that many neoliberal intellectuals also served as board members of think-tanks. While many of the civil society organizations are not transparent in terms of finance, other board members frequently come from corporations and interest groups. The mapping effort across time and space has yielded a broad picture of global networks so far (compare Walpen, 2004; work on the global Atlas network and regional networks by Fischer and Plehwe, 2013, and Djelic, 2014, respectively), but a lot of mapping work remains to be done. Mapping efforts that remain at the level of ideas only, such as that of Eagleton-Pierce (2016), will inevitably miss important dimensions and variations of neoliberal thought, although Eagleton-Pierce does succeed in making visible the morphology of neoliberal ideology and political thought in the tradition of Freeden's work.

Of course, it does not help that neoliberals themselves frequently (though not always) avoided referring to themselves as such. Due to the negative associations of neoliberalism with economic globalization, unfettered competition, the de(con)struction of society, inevitability (TINA) and practical constraints of all kinds, neoliberals were eager to develop alternative terminology like classical liberalism. Certain wings of the neoliberal thought style defected from Mont Pèlerin because it was considered too close to the technocracy of the modern state. Mises followers opened a competing property and freedom network, for example (<http://propertyandfreedom.org/>). Thankfully, Sam Bowman of the Adam Smith Institute recently published the following positive list of essentials, notably excluding the concessions to democracy that were visible in the statement of aims of Mont Pèlerin (compare Plehwe, 2009):

- 1 Pro-markets
- 2 Pro-property rights
- 3 Pro-growth
- 4 Individualistic
- 5 Empirical and open-minded

- 6 Globalist in outlook
- 7 Optimistic about the future
- 8 Focused on changing the world for the better

Bowman goes on to clarify the stakes of using the term 'neoliberalism' instead of other, competing names:

Adopting the word 'neoliberal', then, is not a change of policy but recognition that other labels do not describe what we've always been quite as well. We're not closing the door on libertarians, Objectivists, anarcho-capitalists, Whigs, free marketeers, conservatives, voluntarists, agorists or liberals – these are our friends and allies, and we welcome all to speak at our events, but these are not the words that most accurately describe us. (Bowman, 2016)

Recalling Hayek's issue with conservatism, Bowman believes that the much admired classical liberalism is not adept at dealing with new circumstances. While he does not relate his ideas to socio-economic realities and class structure, he seems to hark back to Mannheim's dynamic view when he states that: 'Adam Smith, of course, but also people like John Stuart Mill and David Hume – are the progenitors of this order, but our policy programme is updated for the modern world. You might say that neoliberals are classical liberals with smartphones, internet access and frequent flier miles' (Bowman, 2016).

## CONCLUSION

This chapter began with an observation regarding the proliferation of somewhat limited understandings of neoliberalism that seems partially to derive from the different orientations of social science and humanities disciplines. It was suggested that situated group biography and Karl Mannheim's understanding of the sociology of knowledge would help to overcome such limits. Applying Mannheim's ideas, the neoliberal worldview can be captured in its stringency and variety through a mapping of thought collectives, which originally generated a new style of thought in the late 1930s, and continue to reproduce it and to take it into new domains in the twenty-first century. The neoliberal thought style arguably became the key characteristic of a new epoch with the crisis of the Bretton Woods order. It also generated a huge crisis in the global South, and more recently in the global North, and an enormous backlash which has taken the shape of right-wing populism in particular.

Curiously, neoliberalism as a thought style and its many different foot soldiers organized in thought collectives still remain somewhat of a mystery. Some deny their existence altogether, others consider some of them but not others, and many use too broad a brush to capture nearly all recent culture as neoliberal (compare Plehwe, 2016, on the problems of under- and overspecification). The categories of thought style and thought collectives are very useful in helping to organize the necessary mapping effort. A thought style is associated closely with a major ideology, but it can be used with greater ease because the notion is less loaded with normative baggage. Thought styles can be concretely mapped through observation of the various thought collectives that contribute to and adopt major orientations from a dominant style. By using the notion of thought style, it becomes possible to deal with contradictions and inconsistencies, say, between Chicago School and ordoliberalism, rather than insisting that only one can represent the one and only or real neoliberalism. Adhering to Mannheim's insistence on the link between intellectual thought and socio-economic realities, it becomes less important to establish pure genealogies and more important to observe the ways in which neoliberal ideas are combined in different places and circumstances. Notions of flexible morphology might prove useful as a way of avoiding the pitfall of classifying all teams according to major ideologies or thought styles and minor thought collectives or schools. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the categories of thought collectives and style are abstract and need to be filled with more concrete content. If we think we have identified a major neoliberal thought style, what are the contributing collectives? What is the smallest common denominator? Do they overlap with competing styles in certain peripheries of their configuration, or even at the core? Inequality, for example, is a key concept of right-wing thought that can be shared by neoliberalism and conservatism. Individualism is a key concept of progressive origins that can be shared by social liberalism and neoliberalism. The intellectual effort at any rate will be futile if it remains in the abstract. Students of neoliberal thought collectives cannot rely on neat textbooks; they need to wade through the mud of social and intellectual struggles between neoliberal and other agencies that shape social reality in time and space.

## Notes

- 1 Even if the political world enters the picture as strongly as it does in the rich work of Dardot and

Laval (2013), the history of neoliberalism is based on the writings of individual European (and American) authors. Resulting and highly problematic shortcomings include a full separation of Nazism and 'oppositional' ordoliberalism (76) instead of observing work of emerging ordoliberals within some of the Nazi-organizations, arguably contributing to a minority wing of the Nazi party itself. On the work of von Stackelberg, see Ban (2016).

- 2 It is important to note that Kuhn did not believe in a linear progress model of science, compare Kuhn (1974).
- 3 Mannheim rejected objectivist phenomenology, but embraced phenomenological emphasis on intentionality. He was 'impatient to penetrate beyond the phenomenological surface to the very core of things, to the substance of historical reality which only the active, fully committed subject was able to reach. This is the essence of Mannheim's sociology of knowledge; it is his "utopia", in the development of which Marxism and historicism played the most decisive role. The idea of "existentially determined" knowledge, which is one of the cornerstones of the theory, may be traced to Marxism, whereas historicism is the source of the doctrine of the "perspectivist" nature of knowledge' (Kecskemeti, 1952: 8–9).
- 4 'Skills, experience in the field, and ideas whether "wrong" or "right" passed from hand to hand and from brain to brain. These ideas certainly underwent substantive change in passing through any one person's mind, as well as from person to person, because of the difficulty of understanding transmitted knowledge. In the end an edifice of knowledge was erected that nobody had really foreseen or intended' (Fleck, 1979: 69).

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